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ETHNOLOGICAL RESEARCHES IN SANTO DOMINGO.

By SIR ROBERT SCHOMBURGK.

In a Letter addressed to H. R. H. PRINCE ALBERT, K.G., and communicated by his Royal Highness to the Ethnological Society. — Read 11th December 1851.

SIR,

SANTO DOMINGO, as the cradle of the new world, will always possess great interest, although its splendour belongs to former days; and the city, once the capital of the Spanish empire in South America, of which Oviedo, the historian, wrote to the Emperor Charles V. that Spain possessed none that could surpass it, shews in our days its former magnificence only in crumbling ruins. My eight years' wanderings in the interior of Guiana, among the Indian tribes that inhabit those wild regions, have made me so well acquainted with their manners and languages, that I gladly avail myself of every opportunity, to trace, by a comparison of customs and idioms, the relationship between the still existing tribes, and those which European cruelty has extirpated. My appointment as Her Majesty's Consul to the Dominican Republic promised me, during leisure hours, a rich field for such investigations, for the Europeans came here first in close contact with the aborigines.

It is a melancholy fact, that of the millions of natives who, at the discovery, peopled the island of St. Domingo, not a single pure descendant does now exist. But a careful observer of the mixed races, that in a great measure form the population of the Dominican Republic, will occasionally trace among them the characteristic features of the aborigines.

Some stocks of the human race retain their characteristics much more tenaciously than others, the peculiarities of one

being lost in a few generations, and those of another being transmitted through several. I have never seen that tenacity more displayed than among the mixed race, who to this day are called "Indios" in Santo Domingo, and in whom the peculiarities of the pure Indian have preserved themselves for more than two centuries.

This observation refers chiefly to the female sex of the so-called "Indios." Their symmetrical forms, the pure olive complexion and soft skin, their large black eyes, and the most luxuriant hair of an ebony colour, attest at once their descent from the Indian stock. We are told by the historians that the last remnant of the Indians, amounting to from three to four hundred, retired under Enrique, the last of the Caciques of Santo Domingo, to Boya, a village about thirty miles to the north-north-east of the city. Enrique had been converted to the Christian religion, and the Emperor Charles V. ensured to this remnant of the aborigines civil rights, and conferred upon him the title of Don. This miserable fragment of a once powerful nation soon vanished from the earth, borne down by their misfortunes and the diseases introduced by the Spaniards. The extirpation of the pure Indian race prevented me from making comparative inquiries between the still existing tribes of Guiana and those that once inhabited Santo Domingo. My researches were therefore restricted to what history, and the few and poor monuments have transmitted to us of their customs and manners. Their language lives only in the names of places, rivers, trees, and fruits; but all combine in declaring that the people who bestowed these names were identical with the Carib and Arawak tribes of Guiana.

An excursion to the calcareous caverns of Pommier, about ten leagues to the west of the city of Santo Domingo, afforded me the examination of some picture-writing executed by the Indians after the arrival of the Spaniards. These remarkable caves, which are in themselves of high interest, are situated within the district over which, at the landing of the Spaniards, the fair Indian Catalina reigned as Cacique. Oviedo relates that she knew how to captivate the Aragonian, Miguel Diaz. In consequence of a brawl with one of his

companions, whom he supposed he had mortally wounded, Diaz fled from Isabella, and found an asylum at Catalina's village. Fearful of losing her lover, who, after a few months, seemed to long to return to his companions and his accustomed occupations, Catalina employed the most powerful means she could have resorted to, in order to induce the Spaniards to settle within her own territory, concluding naturally that this would ensure the continued presence of Diaz. She related, therefore, that the adjacent mountains possessed rich mines, and drew his attention to the superior fertility of the soil, which so much surpassed that upon which Columbus had founded the city of Isabella; moreover, that the river Ozama afforded at its entrance a secure and fine harbour. Diaz returned with this information to Isabella, where he found to his joy the man recovered from his wounds whom he thought he had killed, and the report of the rich mines produced him an easy pardon. The Adelantado Bartholomew, who governed in the absence of his brother, visited the district himself, and erected, in 1496, a fortified tower in the neighbourhood of the mines, which he called San Cristobal; but the workmen that built it, finding the precious metal even in the stones they used for its construction, named it the "Golden Tower." The mines were soon exhausted, and the country assumed again the aspect of exuberant nature. When, therefore, the covetousness and cupidity of the Spaniards sacrificed the lives of millions of Indians to their idol gold, the caverns, which previously had only been used for their worship, became now a retreat from the Spanish crossbows and the frightful bloodhounds sent in pursuit of the poor Indian.

Numerous traditions prevail among the present inhabitants of the neighbourhood; and the most daring of the hunters in pursuit of wild hogs would never venture to follow the chased animal when it sought its retreat in one of the caves which no person has entered yet; for here, they say, Catalina reigns still as Cacique over her subjects, who only leave their subterranean abode when darkness has spread over the adjacent country. When the people that related the legend to me observed a doubtful smile in my features, they adduced as

a proof in support of it, that every time they visited the outer caves, and left perchance some rubbish or the ashes of fires on the ground, the Indians appeared during night, and swept it carefully away, so that the ground would be found next morning perfectly clean.

I was greatly interested in a number of symbolic pictures, which the Indians had traced with charcoal on the white and smooth walls of one of the smaller caves, which bears at present the name of the "painted chamber." This embankment exhibits numerous figures, rudely drawn on the white walls, and of such a fresh appearance that one is inclined to think it had been done but yesterday. Peter Martyr, of Angleria, the contemporary of Columbus, and one of the earliest historians of his discoveries, relates, in his first "Decade of the Ocean," that the Aborigines of Santo Domingo held caves in great veneration; for out of them, they say, came the sun and moon to give light to the world; and mankind likewise issued from two caves of unequal height, according to the size of their statures. The "painted chamber" was probably used for worship. The figures, of a few of which I have taken the liberty to enclose a representation, consist of birds, men, utensils employed in the household of the Indians, and ships of European appearance.

During my journeys in the interior of Guiana, I found at the "Ilha de Pedra," on the Rio Negro (a tributary of the Amazon), the representation of two vessels under sail, carved in the granitic rock. The smaller represented a schooner, the larger a galleon. In the general uncertainty which prevails with regard to these monuments of by-gone races, it was particularly gratifying to me to find these sculptures, which afforded a clue to the period when they were executed. The caves near Pommier offered a second instance of a still later period, where the art of cutting figures into the rock was no longer practised; namely, a large bird among the picture-writings is represented with a ship on its back, a symbol, perhaps, of deep signification. The cross occurs repeatedly, alone or combined with other figures; but this is not surprising, as the Spaniards, at the earliest period of their arrival, made converts from among the Indians.

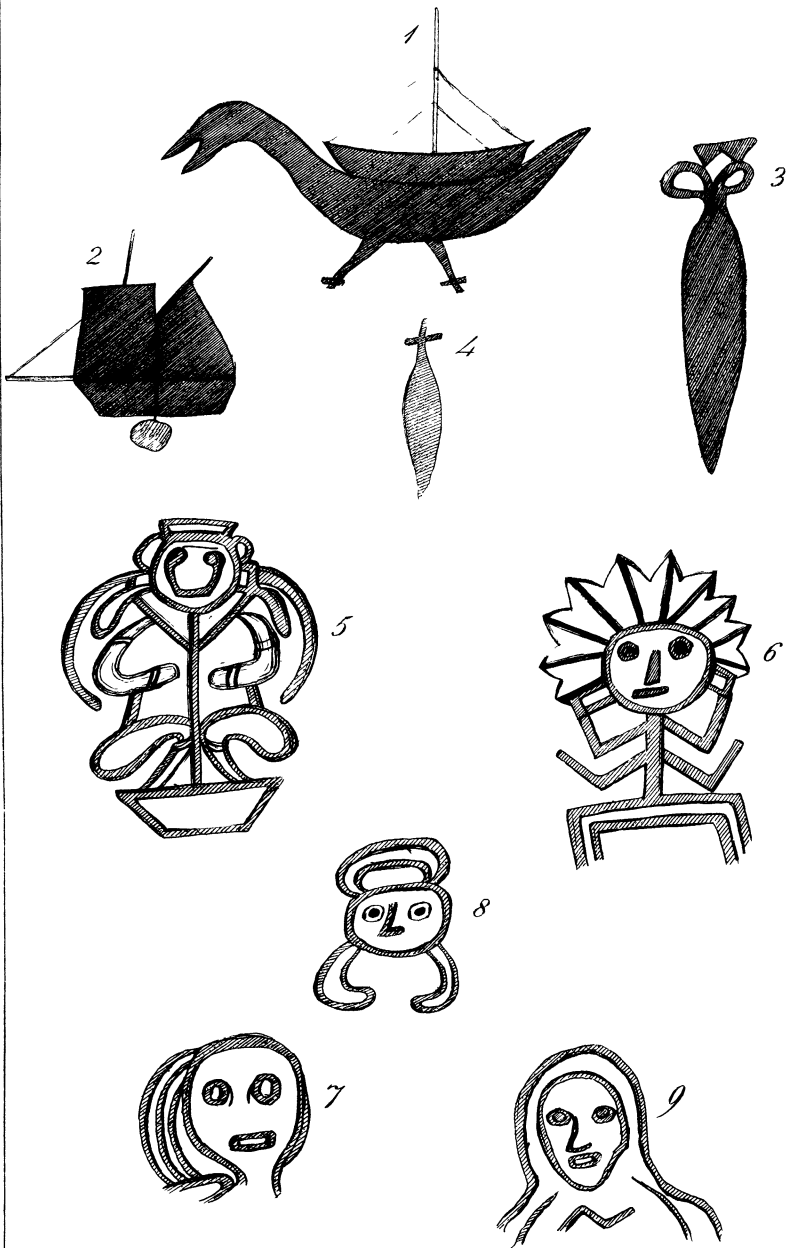


Fig. 1,2,3,4 Painted with Charcoal on the Cave walls at Pommier
Fig. 5,6,7,8,9 Cut in the Rock at the Caves of Pommier

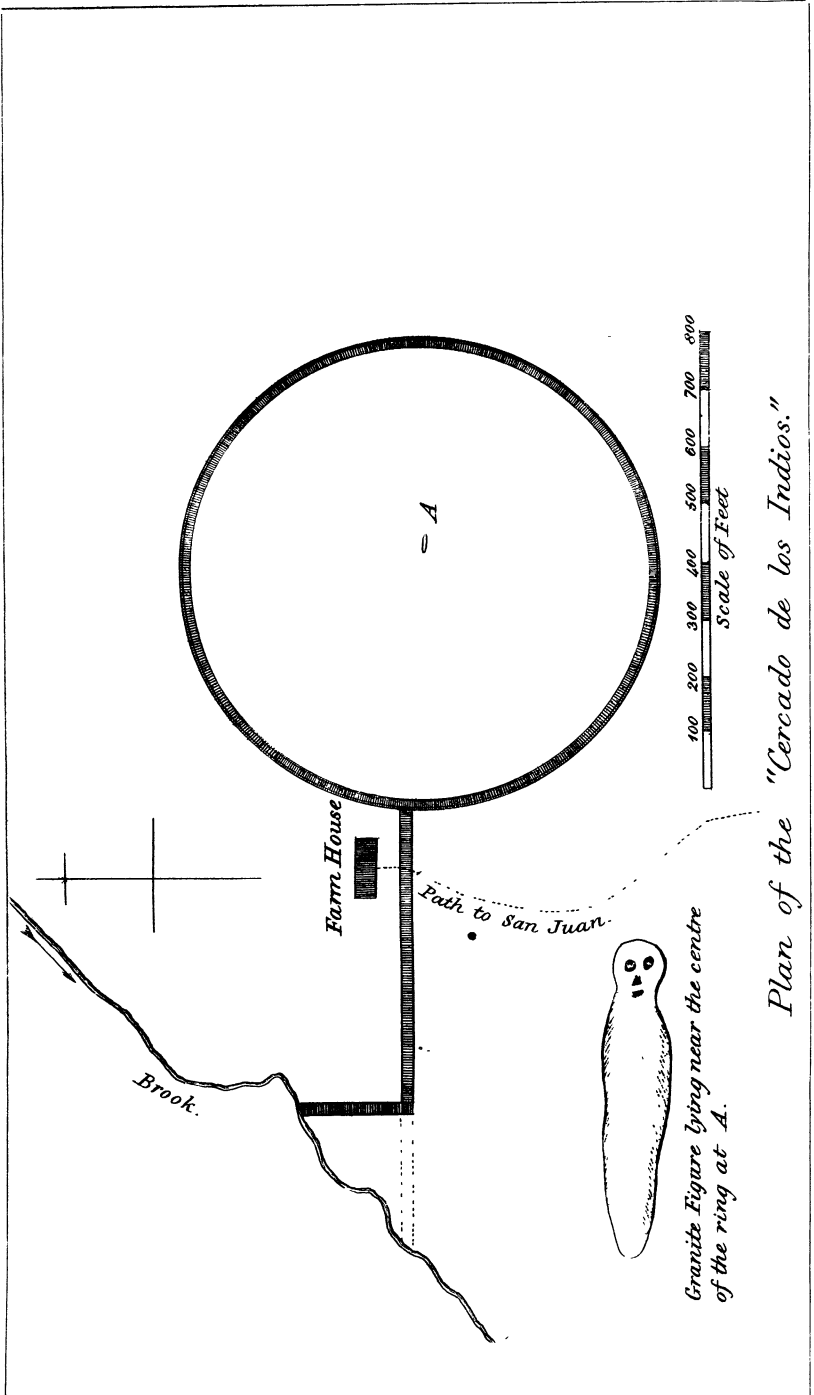
Near the entrance of a second cave, close to the former, I observed some carvings in the rock. The character of these figures, and their being cut in the hard substance of stone, indicate a more remote date than those in the other cave. I have copied some of these figures, among which No. 5 resembles some of the idols which to this day are occasionally found in the districts over which, at the landing of Columbus, Mayobanex and Guarionex, both of the Carib nation, reigned as Caciques. The head-dress of Figure 6 occurs frequently on the carved rocks in Guiana, which I traced during my travels between the rivers Orinoco and Amazon, over a territory 192,000 square miles in compass. The rock at the cavern near Pommier contained numerous other figures besides those which I copied, but time did not permit me to trace any more during that visit, and circumstances have since prevented me from returning to the caves.

Baron Humboldt observes, when alluding to the carvings he met with on the banks of the Orinoco, that "it must not be forgotten that nations of very different descent, when in a similar uncivilized state, having the same disposition to simplify and generalize outlines, and being impelled by inherent mental dispositions to form rhythmical repetitions and series, may be led to produce similar signs and symbols." Baron Humboldt had only opportunity to view the carved figures on the banks of the Orinoco, but the examination of a great number of these symbols shews to me that there is a great difference in their character and execution; nor is it my opinion that the idols worked in stone, and the carvings on the rocks, were executed by the races that inhabited South America and the West Indies at the time of their discovery. They belong to a remoter period, and exhibit much more skill and patience than the simple figures painted with charcoal on the walls of the cave near Pommier. The figures carved in stone, and worked without iron tools, denote, if not civilization, a quick conception, and an inexhaustible patience, to give to these hard substances the desired forms. As a proof of this remark, I beg leave to draw the attention of your Royal Highness to the small sculptured figures which accompany this letter, and which I shall consider myself highly honoured if your Royal Highness will condescend to accept.

The terra cotta consists of rude ornaments, with which these races embellished their household utensils.

Judging by these specimens of their skill and imagination, only a low estimate can be formed of the civilization the people that made them had attained ; but where the design is solely to give expression to features the effort is not contemptible. I humbly beg leave to draw the attention of your Royal Highness to the figure marked No. 5, chiefly if seen from the left in profile.

With respect to the age or epoch when the figures sculptured of stone were executed there is no tradition. It is remarkable that they are only found where we have sure evidence that the Caribs inhabited or visited the place. I have no reason to believe that they were made by the Caribs, which opinion I am the more inclined to adopt on comparing them with the tools and utensils executed by the still existing tribes I found in Guiana. There are, however, various proofs that the Caribs inhabited Santo Domingo ; among others, I found at the eastern point of the island, called Punta Engaño, numerous heaps of conchshells (*strombus gigas*). These shells have invariably a hole near the spire, which has been made for the purpose of detaching the animal from the shell, and to extract it with ease. I met with a large number of similar piles at the island of Anegada, which the historians of the Antilles ascribe to the Caribs, who, on their descent from the Lucayas to wage war upon the natives of Puerto Rico, touched first at Anegada, in order to provision themselves with conches for their expedition. A far more interesting discovery than these heaps of conchshells, during my travels in Santo Domingo, is, however, a granitic ring in the neighbourhood of San Juan de Maguana, which seems to have entirely escaped the attention of previous historians and travellers. Maguana formed one of the five kingdoms into which Santo Domingo, on the arrival of the Spaniards, was divided. It was governed by the Carib Cacique Caonabo (which name signifies rain), the most fierce and powerful of the chieftains, and the irreconcilable enemy of the Europeans. His favourite wife was the unfortunate Anacaona, famed in the island for her beauty, her wisdom, and, as recorded by all the early historians, for her kindness towards the white men.



Nevertheless, Ovando, when Governor of Santo Domingo, accused her of conspiracy, and carried her in chains to the city, and "ignominiously hanged her in the presence of the people whom she had so long and so signally befriended." The granitic ring is now known in the neighbourhood under the name of "el Cercado de los Indios," and lies on a savannah surrounded with groves of wood, and bounded by the river Maguana. The circle consists mostly of granitic rocks, which prove, by their smoothness, that they have been collected on the banks of a river, probably at the Maguana, although its distance is considerable. The rocks are mostly each from thirty to fifty pounds in weight, and have been placed closely together, giving the ring the appearance of a paved road, twenty-one feet in breadth, and, as far as the trees and bushes which had grown up from between the rocks permitted me to ascertain, two thousand two hundred and seventy feet in circumference. A large granitic rock, five feet seven inches in length, ending in obtuse points, lies nearly in the middle of the circle, partly imbedded in the ground. I do not think that its present situation is the one it originally occupied; the rock stood probably in the centre. It has been smoothed and fashioned by human hands; and although the surface has suffered from the atmospheric influence, there is evidence that it was intended to represent a human figure: the cavities of the eyes and mouth are still visible. This rock has, in every respect, the appearance of the figure represented by Père Charlevoix in his "*Histoire de l'île Espanole ou de Saint-Domingue*," which he designates as a "figure trouvée dans une sepulture Indienne." A pathway of the same breadth as the ring extends from it firstly due west, and turns afterwards at right angle to the north, ending at a small brook. The pathway is, almost for its whole extent, overgrown with thick forest; I could not, therefore, ascertain the exact length, and the accompanying plan exhibits this part only on supposition. No doubt can exist that this circle surrounded the Indian idol, and that within it thousands of the natives adored the deity in the unshapen form of the granitic rock. But another question remains to be solved, namely, were the inhabitants whom the Spaniards met in the island the constructors of this ring?

Were they the adorers of that deity? I think not. All the early historians of the discovery of the new world concur that the natives of the Antilles and the adjacent terra firma possessed no ceremonies in adorning the deity. Peter Martyr, speaking of the superstitions of the Indians who inhabited Hispaniola, or Santo Domingo, does not allude to any public worship, and expressly observes that their idols or zemes were not of stone, but merely images made in the shape of devils from gossampine cotton.

Among the antiquities recently discovered near San Diego, within a day's march of the Pacific Ocean, at the head of the Gulf of California, were likewise granitic rings, or circular walls round venerable trees, columns, and blocks of hieroglyphics. If my opinion could possess any value, I should pronounce the granitic ring near San Juan, the figures which I have seen cut into rocks in the interior of Guiana, and the sculptured figures, to belong to a race far superior in intellect to the one Columbus met in Hispaniola, who came from the northern parts of Mexico adjacent to the ancient country or district of Huastecas, and that this race was conquered and extirpated by the nations that inhabited the countries when the Europeans landed.

I venture to hope that the account of my discoveries of a few monuments that have descended to us of a by-gone race may not be entirely unacceptable.

I intend to commence, in a few days, my journey to the northern provinces, for the execution of which I have already received the permission of Lord Palmerston, and promise myself a rich harvest among the ruins of the first settlements and fortifications which the Europeans erected in the New World.

I remain,

With the highest respect,

SIR,

Your Royal Highness'

most dutiful and most devoted humble servant,

ROBERT H. SCHOMBURGK.

City of Santo Domingo,

15th March 1851.